USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Red River Basin Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries RRBI

Overview
The Red River basin, located in parts of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, has lost a significant amount of its native prairie wetlands and their natural buffering capacity that helps to reduce the impacts from severe flooding. Repeated basin flooding has also decreased wildlife habitat, increased water quality concerns and increased flood damage. The 25-million acre area is located in the mid-continent Prairie Pothole Region – a critical migratory wildlife pathway.

Higher than normal rainfall coupled with rapid snow melts over the past 20 years has caused serious erosion, adversely affecting water quality in the area, while out-of-bank, rapidly moving flood water destroys habitat, threatens property and crucial ecosystems. Complicating the issue is the varying topographies of the region, which range from extremely flat, glacial lake plains to hilly beach ridges.

In an effort to help, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Red River Basin Initiative (RRBI) in fiscal year 2011 to restore wetlands and make other targeted conservation improvements.

Unlike the other typical wetland restorations, some of the wetlands created through RRBI offer added mitigation of flood damage within the basin by allowing additional flood storage within the easement acres. Conservation practices within the easements are aimed at hydrologic restoration, flood mitigation, water quality improvement and increased and improved wildlife habitat.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has echoed the importance of tackling environmental challenges in the basin, and in 2014 committed USDA to invest up to $50 million over five years. The announcement builds on NRCS' previous commitments in the basin and allows for a whole suite of NRCS programs and tool to be used to address these resource concerns.

Priorities
Through RRBI, NRCS works with local, state and federal groups to develop strategies to focus conservation efforts in locally-identified and selected priority landscapes. NRCS is partnering with the Red River Retention Authority (RRRA), which has a goal to reduce flooding in the basin by 20 percent.

To achieve this goal, the RRRA is working with partners to create 1 million acre feet of flood water retention in the basin over the next 20 years. NRCS has made a major commitment to help reach this goal by setting a goal of creating 250,000 acre feet of temporary flood storage through all of NRCS' programs. The RRBI's portion of the NRCS goal is to create 40,000 acre-feet of floodwater storage during the lifespan of the initiative.

Funding Sources
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

Results
In fiscal year 2014, NRCS invested nearly $475,000 in EQIP financial assistance through RRBI to help landowners make conservation improvements to more than 5,100 acres. Meanwhile, NRCS also invested more than $1.9 million in ACEP protecting more than 1,300 acres of wetlands under conservation easements. In the past three years, NRCS has targeted funding to protect vital wetlands under easements – investing nearly $17 million to place nearly 18,000 acres under conservation contracts or easements. And in terms of water storage, wetlands created or enhanced during the past three years through easements have added over 15,000 acre-feet of flood water storage.

The Red River basin includes parts of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Feature Story

Manston Slough Project Brings Partners, Landowners Together to Reduce Flooding

Flooding in the Red River basin has been a problem for years, frequently damaging wildlife habitat, homes and businesses. In NRCS' efforts to accelerate conservation efforts in the basin, NRCS joined with a number of partners to tackle flooding problems along Manston Slough, an area that has suffered recently from flood events.

Repeated flooding degrades habitat, impairs water quality and impacts the livelihood of those who live and work in the watershed. In 2009, NRCS joined forces with the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). This year, the partners completed a large-scale project that will help prevent floods, clean water and enhance habitat.

The partners focused on a 27.5-square mile area along this slough, which flows to the south branch of the Buffalo River, a tributary of the Red River. The project diverts water flowing down the slough into nearby wetlands on private lands. These wetlands were restored through easements with NRCS and connected to the slough through partner efforts. Water is diverted to the wetlands in times of peak flow, and they have a temporary capacity of about 5,546 acre-feet, helping hold water during peak flow times.

NRCS worked with landowners in the region to convert agricultural lands back to their original condition as wetlands. Through the former Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), now called the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), NRCS provides incentive payments to landowners who voluntarily restore wetlands. Through WRP, landowners put their land into permanent or 30-year easements.

"Wetlands are often called 'nature's sponges' for their ability to store and filter water," said Keith Weston, the coordination for the Red River Basin Initiative (RRBI) in Minnesota. "Because of wetlands' capacity to hold water, restoration of wetlands is an effective way to mitigate flooding."

In this project, NRCS worked with landowners to restore more than 2,000 acres of wetlands through the creation of 28 easements, investing $3.3 million. These easement programs provide landowners a voluntary way to convert marginal or frequently flooded cropland into wetlands – and then be compensated for its permanence as a wetland.

Now that the Manston Slough project is completed, the area now has 2,200 acres of restored wetlands to store water, and in total, 5,500 acres of land improved with conservation practices.

This project furthered NRCS' goals for RRBI, which are to help prevent flooding, improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat. In total, the partners invested $9.4 million on this project.

"This project is one of NRCS' many investments in the region," Weston said. "Through projects like this one, and our many efforts through the Red River Basin Initiative, we look forward to healthier habitat and safer communities in the basin."

Fiscal Year 2014 Red River Basin Initiative
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

	EQIP			ACEP Wetland Reserve Easements		
	Contracts	**Obligations**	**Acres**	**Contracts**	**Obligations**	**Acres**
Minnesota	18	$264,497	2,881	1	$766,472	631.0
North Dakota	6	$210,055	2,235	4	$1,175,503	688.8
South Dakota	0	$0	0	0	0	0
Total	**24**	**$474,552**	**5,116**	**5**	**$1,941,975**	**1,319.8**

For more information, visit: nrcs.usda.gov/initiatives

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